
Executive Committee Report



Conservation in Action Summit

A new century of conservation challenges

Executive Committee Members

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Introduction

The National Wildlife Refuge System can look back with well-earned pride on a Centennial year that began with a celebration at Pelican Island, the nation's first bird sanctuary, and continued almost nonstop across the country. In the process, millions of people – many of them decision makers on Capitol Hill and in statehouses around the nation – became educated and enthused about a system that was once thought to be America's "best kept secret."

In so many ways, the "secret" is out. Refuges saw about 40 million visits last fiscal year, 10 percent more than a year earlier. Radio and television public service announcements distributed during the Centennial year reached an estimated 95 million Americans, while print and broadcast news stories touched another 97 million people. Partnerships added a different dimension, creating, among a host of outcomes, 26 programs on ESPN network that were broadcast into 1 million homes each week.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams directed the Refuge System to cap its Centennial year with a substantive gathering of the diverse conservation community – Friends groups, nonprofit and state conservation organizations, partners and supporters – that has cared for the national wildlife refuges. He directed that this cadre of supporters develop a shared set of priorities for the Refuge System for the next five to 15 years. From that direction grew this *Conservation in Action Summit*.

Setting the Stage for the *Conservation in Action Summit*

Planning for the *Conservation in Action Summit* began in August 2003 when conservation partners and representatives of the Refuge System and Friends groups gathered in a brainstorming session to identify the most pressing issues facing the NWRs.

After several subsequent discussions and analyses, the groups agreed that the challenges the Refuge System would face in its second century of conservation fell into four topical areas: wildlife and habitat, recreation, science, and strategic growth. Participants also recognized that a cadre of strong leaders would be needed to resolve these challenges. Therefore, a fifth topical area – leadership – was added, and the Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to prepare a leadership paper in conjunction with its workforce planning efforts.

An executive committee – composed of the Deputy Chief of the National Wildlife Refuge System, Bob Byrne of the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) and Evan Hirsche, President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association – has guided the summit's organization. Bob Byrne, wildlife program coordinator at WMI, also leads the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), an essential supporter of the Refuge System when issues are discussed in Washington, DC. The National Wildlife Refuge Association, led by Evan Hirsche, focuses its attention exclusively on supporting the Refuge System. The Association is the umbrella organization that facilitates cooperation and coordination among Refuge Friends groups.

Following the August 2003 meeting, the executive committee named co-chairs for five teams, which were charged with fashioning the ideas and potential actions that would

be the basis for vibrant discussions when the full summit gathered in May. Each team was chaired by a Refuge System Division Chief and a Regional Chief, who, in turn, selected Fish and Wildlife Service field personnel and members of conservation organizations and Friends groups to serve with them.

The Teams’ Deliberations and White Papers

Each team has worked from an identical template, an outline of questions that guided deliberations and ensured similar approaches to the work. The template required each team to identify how its topical area contributed to fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, how success could be articulated and measured, and what actions, partnerships and collaborations could be formulated to meet the challenges identified during the August brainstorming session. While the template was an effective analytical tool, it was designed to be just a first step.

After the templates were finalized the executive committee asked each team to write a white paper, articulating its conclusions and incorporating the opinions of Service personnel, elicited by a survey commissioned by the committee and conducted by KRC Research. CARE distributed a nearly identical survey to conservation partners and Friends. The teams used the employee survey’s findings to refine their white papers, which are being presented at the *Conservation in Action Summit*, so named by the executive committee.

Executive Committee’s Discussion of the White Papers

As demonstrated by the white papers in this binder, the teams gave considerable thought to the challenges facing the Refuge System. Their collective expertise is apparent, as is the creative tension among some of the papers. While the white papers will configure discussions at the *Conservation in Action Summit*, identification of shared and measurable priorities rests with the summit participants.

The executive committee reviewed all the white papers and produced this Executive Committee Report to summarize the findings and better focus discussions at summit.

The Next 100 Years

For the past century, the Refuge System has succeeded in staving off the loss of irreplaceable ecosystems squeezed by a growing country. Wildlife refuges are a consistent and visible promise to Americans that species wild and free will always have a place on the land and in the national consciousness.

Over the last 100 years, people have discovered wildlife refuges. In 1951, refuges hosted 3.4 million people. Today, more than 40 million annual visits are recorded. The numbers will probably increase substantially in the near future as the population grows and Americans realize that visiting America’s public lands – including wildlife refuges – is one way to gain physical and emotional health.

In the next 15 years and during the Refuge System's second century of conservation, collaborative work with national state, regional and local partners, refuge professionals and a growing circle of Friends and volunteers is essential to assure success.

Refuge System Mission – The Improvement Act The future of the Refuge System lies in the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, which must be the guiding light as *Conservation in Action Summit* participants hone the teams' work into a set of measurable priorities. To start, the Refuge System's mission is clearly enunciated in the Improvement Act:

"The mission of the System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

Many have shortened the mission statement to the slogan "on refuges, wildlife comes first" or simply, "wildlife first." Such shorthand may sometimes help to explain what refuges do. But, in creating a shared sense of priorities, the *Conservation in Action Summit* participants must be guided by the Improvement Act rather than slogans.

All wildlife conservation efforts on refuges must be guided by the Improvement Act's language, including the concept, "for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans." Disregarding this important element of the Refuge System's mission have enabled some to inappropriately argue that citizens cannot personally benefit from, or experience, the Refuge System until all wildlife and habitat conservation work is complete. While this viewpoint may engender an interesting "either-or" debate, the Refuge System's mission clearly requires that both wildlife conservation *and* human benefits must be accorded importance.

The Improvement Act is clear about two things:

- Any use of a national wildlife refuge must be compatible with the major purposes for which the area was established and the mission of the Refuge System.
- Compatible wildlife dependent recreation is a legitimate and appropriate general public use of the Refuge System, directly related to the mission of the System and the purposes of many refuges.

Wildlife and People

It is not surprising to see spirited debate about recreational uses of refuges. The first national wildlife refuges were inviolate sanctuaries for birds, where market shooters and other disturbances were kept out of nesting areas. The Refuge System once believed that taking care of wildlife on refuges meant simply keeping people out. Some refuges or parts of refuges remain closed today in order to protect the most sensitive areas.

Over its history, the Refuge System has learned that engaged citizens are essential catalysts for successful conservation. By experiencing and enjoying wildlife refuges, people develop an appreciation for fish and wildlife. Refuges provide outstanding opportunities for people to hunt and fish, to observe and photograph wildlife, and to learn more about the natural environment. Public appreciation of refuges and wildlife fosters sound refuge management.

The Improvement Act provides a clear hierarchy — all uses of refuges must be compatible with their purposes and the Refuge System mission. That does not diminish the importance of wildlife-dependent recreation and recreationists to conservation. Without the continued work of hunters, anglers, other outdoor enthusiasts and concerned citizens, there could be no conservation and no Refuge System.

In the view of the executive committee, the guiding principles of the Refuge System best demonstrate the evolution in refuge management philosophy. *Fulfilling the Promise*, written from the Refuge System's 1998 Keystone, CO, conference, best articulates core values. The first states:

"We are land stewards, guided by Aldo Leopold's teachings that land is a community of life and that love and respect for the land is an extension of ethics. We seek to reflect that land ethic in our stewardship and to instill it in others."

In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold wrote:

"The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."

In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

While there is disagreement among some papers regarding the Refuge System's priorities, there is consensus that the Refuge System cannot exist without active community support. No white paper articulates the importance of community involvement in refuge management as its most critical element for success; instead, it is fundamental to all the papers.

Communities and Partners

Refuges are very different than national parks because they are not primarily destinations to which people travel great distances for long vacations. Instead, most recreational users of refuges come from the surrounding areas.

Recreational programs on refuges generally reflect local customs and traditions as well as economies. Hunting and fishing tend to be the primary forms of recreation on refuges in rural areas. Refuges near major cities tend to appeal to visitors looking for healthy ways to spend time outdoors with their families. Thus, the needs and desires of a local community greatly influence a refuge's program offerings.

Also influencing a refuge's visitor services is the level of involvement of volunteer and partners from the local community. Volunteers perform many wildlife surveys, help band birds, fight invasive species, and conduct scientific research. Individuals, community organizations, local conservation organizations and chapters, and Friends groups all play a vital role in refuge management. These local voices join with national conservation organizations to help the Fish and Wildlife Service and state fish and wildlife agency partners craft comprehensive conservation plans for each refuge.

Such collaboration and consensus building also helps develop a shared-land ethic among the cooperating organizations. All the white papers view partnerships as central to the success of the Refuge System. Some articulate this viewpoint more eloquently than others, but it is clear that 21st century conservation requires collaboration and partnerships; no one entity can protect the habitat needed to assure abundant fish and wildlife.

Strategic Planning

The strategic growth white paper also examines collaborative planning. Much progress have been made in the last five years to develop an integrated approach to setting wildlife and habitat goals for the Refuge System. Many in the conservation community have worked hard to develop landscape-level planning efforts. Private land stewardship must complement conservation efforts on publicly owned, protected areas. There appears to be consensus regarding the need for a scientific approach to landscape-level conservation planning. An implementation plan is now needed.

Condition Assessments

The teams were asked to examine the concept of "condition assessments" when discussing their topical areas. The refuge maintenance program successfully uses such facility condition assessments. Further, the Refuge System uses "condition classes" to describe three categories of fuel loads in the fire management program. This concept could be applied to many aspects of refuge management — from invasive species control to providing quality recreation. If the Refuge System could adequately describe a desired condition, it could describe the measurable increments of work needed to move from the present condition to the desired one.

Indeed, there are innumerable examples of excellence in wildlife conservation, in providing recreational opportunities, in protecting important wildlife habitat, in scientific achievement throughout the Refuge System. But, they are only examples — and they *are* innumerable.

There are few Refuge System-wide efforts to collect and monitor the information necessary to set measurable goals and track progress. For instance, there is no satisfactory baseline of information to describe the current condition of refuge habitats. The Refuge System also lacks an adequate inventory of the recreational opportunities provided on refuges. Without these basic metrics, it is impossible to set goals or measure progress in fulfilling them — a fundamental shortcoming in managing the Refuge System as a *system*.

Condition Assessment Recommendations

Below are the recommendations of the committee:

- The executive committee recommends completion of a system-wide habitat condition assessment to determine the ultimate effectiveness of habitat management efforts. The assessment system must be simple and spatially explicit, like the fire condition classes. Adding layers of information — e.g., condition classes for invasive species infestations — may be sufficient, alongside the fuels condition classes.
- Similarly, a condition assessment of the Refuge System's recreational opportunities is required. More wildlife-dependent recreation on refuges may be possible, but it is impossible to say how much more. An assessment of present levels of system-wide recreation uses is a necessary first step.
- The executive committee was not surprised that the science white paper carefully and thoughtfully examined the Refuge System's requirements to store, analyze and deliver information. Current computer capabilities serve operational and maintenance needs well, but little else. In order to assure good science in decision-making, as well as the effective tracking of measurable, performance goals, the Refuge System must develop state-of-the-art information management systems.

Conclusion

The teams have done an admirable job of capturing the most pressing issues and most vexing challenges facing refuges. The papers reflected the teams' reasoned approach their topical areas, although redundancies among papers made some longer than needed.

Now, participants must concentrate on actionable priorities to come away from the *Conservation in Action Summit* with a strong, shared sense of priorities for the Refuge System. The following pages contain a short list of priorities identified in the white papers in order to focus deliberations.

Draft Priority Actions for Consideration at the Summit

Wildlife and Habitat

- Maintain and improve the quality of refuge habitats through effective land management. Specifically emphasize:
 - ◆ Control and eradicate invasive species, focusing on geographic areas of highest risk and where joint efforts can be made with Partners for Wildlife invasive species control efforts and those of other partners
 - ◆ Protection of water quality and quantity
 - ◆ Effective use of fire management to reduce hazardous fuel loads and improve habitat
- Implement all endangered species recovery plan actions identified for refuges
- Monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge and throughout the Refuge System. Specifically emphasize:
 - ◆ Strengthen continental migratory bird management by conducting inventories and surveys identified in the National Bird Conservation plans on refuge field stations
 - ◆ Improve the stewardship of aquatic resources by systematically assessing fish stocks and other aquatic resources on refuges
 - ◆ Begin baseline inventories of aquatic resources of Refuge System Marine Protected Areas

Conservation Planning

- Assure that states, local communities and citizens, and national partners are actively and effectively involved in designing and participating in refuge management programs by completing comprehensive conservation plans for all refuges by October 2012

Wildlife Dependent Recreation

- Provide more quality hunting and fishing opportunities, wildlife observation and photography, environmental education and interpretation opportunities. Specifically emphasize:
 - ◆ Provide information about recreation opportunities on refuges and modest facilities to help the public find, access and enjoy these opportunities
 - ◆ Provide enhanced visitor services through effective use of volunteers and community partnerships

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- Provide visitors with safe facilities through a continuing facility condition assessment program and by working aggressively to eliminate the deferred maintenance backlog on refuges

Partnerships and Community

- Increase community-based partnerships, such as Refuge Friends groups and those with national conservation organizations, to improve wildlife conservation and visitor services

Law Enforcement

- Protect visitors and natural and cultural resources by providing effective, efficient law enforcement, including citizen involvement in community policing program

Strategic Growth

- Plan and direct the continued strategic growth of the Refuge System by implementing landscape-level conservation planning that complements efforts of other Service programs, the states and other federal agencies, and conservation partners
- Develop a comprehensive, spatially explicit refuge management information system that give decision makers consistent access to quality scientific information and a systematic way to monitor management activities that are integrated with the USGS NBII

Science

- Facilitate scientific research with management applications on refuges by continuing establishment of Land Management Research and Demonstration programs and support facilities on selected refuges. Invite USGS-BRD and other researchers to station staff at these refuges

Leadership

- Assure the availability of a well-trained, diverse and representative conservation leadership with the skills required to meet 21st century conservation challenges

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April 27, 2004